

RECONS Brutalism and Infrastructure

Rutgers dorms are too hot. [Students slept in the lounges](#) last September because their rooms didn't have AC. They will sleep in the lounges again at the end of this semester because [their dorm will not have AC](#). And they will sleep in the lounges at the beginning and end of next year. It will only [continue to get hotter](#). We are already [living through effects](#) of climate change. It will only [get worse](#) because we're certainly [not doing enough](#) to stop it. But we're also not preparing for how we will have to [adapt](#).

This will likely be the first article in a series on economics and our infrastructure. I was not planning on making a series on infrastructure.

In fact, I wanted to talk about the icon of Brutalist architecture that is [Busch campus](#), which the encouraging and inquisitive editors of the RECONS Review supported. I was torn, however, considering that this is the Rutgers Economics Society Review and not the Rutgers Architecture Society Review.

But, of course, neither economics nor architecture exists in isolation. The (perhaps infamous) Busch engineering wings are not the only buildings at Rutgers, and they're not just buildings. They're a lot of things, of course, but for the sake of this newsletter, they're at least [a lot of money](#). They took money to build, and they took money to maintain ([\\$23,014,954.194 replacement value as of 2024](#)). In fact, we Rutgers students are [the major group](#) paying for them.

They, along with the rest of the infrastructure at Rutgers, also represent a time. Buildings are built to be used in the future - this inherently means the architects and designers must make a prediction about what this future might look like. The infrastructure of this campus gives a view into the priorities and perspectives of the people and administrations across history.

And again, it means that we must analyze [our own priorities and beliefs about the future](#). If I wanted to put it into economic words, the decisions surrounding infrastructure and university resources are [cross-temporal](#).

At its core, infrastructure could be agreed-upon allocations of resources. It is as fundamental as you want it to be and applied as you want it to be. It is [local](#), and it is [international](#).

I was also hesitant to write this article at first; it was too limited in scope. Isn't the point of a college economics newsletter to polemicize against the system? (Or maybe unapologetically support it?) To make sweeping conclusions on the nature of international conflict? Something new. Something novel. Something now. We arguably already hear more than enough about Rutgers - we go here. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized the aging, beautiful, and contentious infrastructure of Rutgers is everything that I love about economics.

If you search “[Rutgers engineering building](#)” into the image search engine of your choice, you will likely get lots of pictures of Richard Weeks. I also get photos of the business school and the Nursing and Science Building in Camden. Lovely, new, shiny buildings that you can show to prospective students. You get more pictures of Richard Weeks if you search “[Rutgers School of Engineering Building](#).” But Richard Weeks Hall of Engineering is a different building.

The School of Engineering Building and its four wings, A-D, are the most accurate results for this search. It’s not what Rutgers shows to prospective and incoming students. It is brutalist. [It was completed in 1962](#) and was born from Cold War space-age government bonds supporting scientific research.

I lived on Busch - I would pass by these wings daily while walking to the bus stop. They are not popular wings. They’re where economics majors like me would HAVE to take midterms. Because I like brutalism, I would enjoy walking past these buildings. I would like to walk through Busch. I am often called crazy for that. But these buildings are a core piece of [Rutgers history](#). Of [academic history](#). Of [American history](#). Their reason for existing was a result of specific economic and political priorities of the time; their design reflected not only an [architectural movement](#) but a [philosophical](#) one. Movements that, in their own way, seek to answer how we should interact with our environments. How we should build and create. How we should allocate resources. These questions economists were trying to answer, [in their own way](#), at the same time.

Economics does not just talk about Pareto optimality and efficiency. It talks about equity and fairness, too. So, when we look at the technicals of institutional planning and operations spreadsheets, we do not just evaluate whether we can afford our buildings. We assess whether we will be able to afford our buildings. Whether our future legacy children will be able to afford our buildings. Whether our earth will be able to afford our buildings.

This brings us back to the overheating Rutgers dorms. There are countless applied microeconomic questions this introduces. There are [equity questions](#). There are [urban economics questions](#). There are [behavioral economics questions](#). There are [housing questions](#). [Natural resource questions](#).

It introduces us to countless macroeconomic questions, whether at a state, national, or international level. The entire Northeast is just as - if not more - unprepared for the specific problem of rising indoor heat levels. And there is no easy solution. [Rutgers needs more AC](#), and [the world needs more AC](#) to prevent a [massive heat-related health crisis](#). But [AC makes climate change worse](#). Our technological progress brings with it [massive cooling needs](#). Climate change, at a huge level, will strain [global infrastructure and global systems](#). This is because we will need to [update existing infrastructure, as well as replace destroyed infrastructure](#).

And this is just one problem facing our infrastructure. What about [the H](#) (heating) of HVAC? Haven't mentioned that. There are [many, many problems facing our infrastructure](#). One, for example, is aesthetics. Why don't we like the Brutalist buildings on Busch? Are they ready for the next 20 years? What about Richard Weeks? RBS? Our dorms? 50 years? Can we pay for them? Should we pay for them? Who pays? Who gets access? Are they ready for now? These are questions for a series, with answers from lots of places.